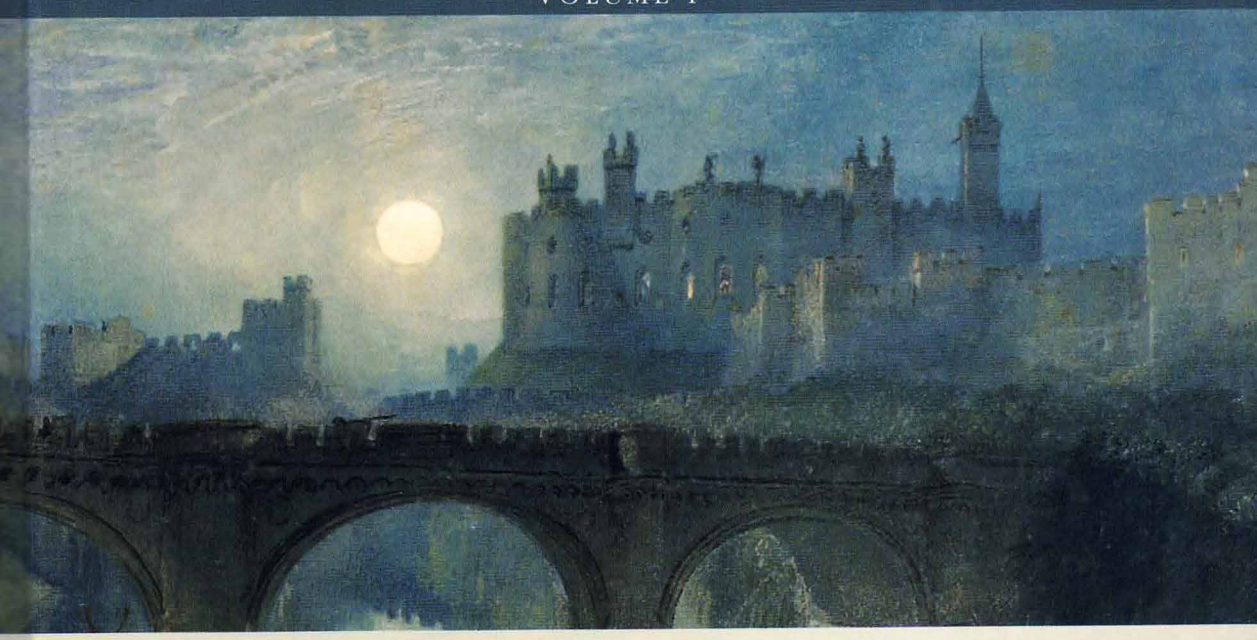
THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

ROMANTIC LITERATURE

A – G

VOLUME I



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Essay

DEBBIE LEE WITH RACHEL SANCHEZ

> The essay begins . . . with the discovery of the self.
>
> Leslie Fiedler, *The Art of the Essay*

> It is not easy to write a familiar style. . . . To write a genuine familiar or truly English style is to write as any one would speak in common conversation.
>
> William Hazlitt, 'On Familiar Style', *Table Talk*

> Here I want to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion, without striving or artifice: for it is my own self that I am painting.
>
> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*

THE PERSONAL AND THE ESSAY

The familiar essay of the Romantic period has roots in the essay's earliest beginnings and still thrives in the form as we know it today. A mix of style, personality, conversation, and content, the essay comes in myriad incarnations in blogs, magazines, literary journals, first-year

composition courses, newspapers, and books, but its primary character is *personal*. Practitioners of the essay characterize it as 'talking on paper' and consider it a genuine dialogue between writer and reader. Because the essay is a form in which personal voice is the prime architect, its structure ranges from argument to montage, braided strands, segments and, most recently, graphics. Philip Lopate, editor of *The Art of the Personal Essay*, an anthology regarded as an essential resource for contemporary essayists, characterizes the form as 'sparkling literary style that is pure pleasure to follow, makes us recognize painful home truths and experience pangs of honesty, awakens our capacity for mental adventure, and puts us in touch with a human voice that we want to follow for as long as he/she will talk to us' (1994: xi). The best essays are conversational both in their 'tonal contract' with readers and in their tendency to respond to earlier essayists (xii). The response, in fact, is the most important piece of the puzzle. Without the response, essays exist without context. Without the response, the authorial 'I' is just a voice, perhaps entertaining, but only a voice distinguishable in ways easily dismissed or forgotten amid the wave of countless other voices, all vying for public attention. Without the response, each essay sits as a written pulpit. There is talk with no real engagement in the history that it illustrates to the reader.

Lopate, one of the most successful living essayists, sees his own work as a response and has named Romantic writers like William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb among his most important models. 'I like writers who seem to have well-stocked minds,' he has said (Taylor 2006: 137). It is no accident that Lopate's models come, in part, from the Romantic period, given the qualities that characterize the Romantic essay: conversation, voice or personality, intimacy, formal experimentation, heightened language and variety of publishing venues. This current essay will trace the development of the Romantic or 'familiar' essay, which is a precursor to the personal essay, one of the most popular forms in written English today.

PRECURSORS TO THE ROMANTIC ESSAY

The essay was born between the cosy pages of the French writer Michel de Montaigne and the elevated lines of the King James translation of the Bible. Montaigne is considered to have invented both the form and the name of the personal essay. His first two volumes were published in 1580, with a third in 1588, and his essays have been models for writers ever since. The distinguishing marks of a Montaigne essay are intimacy and informality. As Montaigne said, 'It is myself that I portray' (Winchester 1970: viii). Montaigne wrote about who he was and what he thought, and structured his pieces as extended conversations with the books on his library shelf. The Elizabethan scholar John Florio translated Montaigne into English in 1603, with further editions in 1613 and 1632. For 50 years, no French book was more popular or more influential than Florio's translations of Montaigne.

Montaigne provided the personal voice, the English Bible the elevated style that would characterize the essays of Romantic writers like Hazlitt, Lamb and Thomas De Quincey. According to Sherwin Cody, the King James Bible transformed Hebrew poetry into English prose, and in so doing set the standard for prose as elevated language (1903/1968: xviii). The King James Bible also underscored the casual mode of writing (thus echoing Montaigne), and demonstrated how heightened prose could be conversational, in books like Job, Song of Solomon and Psalms, for example. The New Testament was a key influence because Christ was not a lecturer or talker, like Socrates. He simply had conversations with his disciples. Ordinary conversation rose to the level of permanent literature. The King James Bible was, in effect, boot camp for the great conversational essayists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Cody 1903/1968: xx).

In 1597, just five years after Montaigne's death, Englishman Francis Bacon came out with his book called 'Essays'. This is the first known use of the term 'essay' in English. Though most scholars believe Bacon borrowed the term from Montaigne, they argue that Bacon used the essay in a formal way rather than adopting Montaigne's conversational tone (Cody 1903/1968: xx; McDonald 1973: xi). For example, Bacon wrote on morality, truth, and the human condition instead of following the intellectual energy of his own diffuse thoughts as Montaigne had done. After Bacon, then, the essay was much less personal and characterized by a soberness of tone that would dominate it for much of the seventeenth century, in writers like Thomas Fuller, Sir Thomas Browne and Isaac Walton. A few essayists, however, kept alive the conversational intimacy Montaigne had pioneered. Abraham Cowley's *Discourses by Way of Essays* (1668), for example, include quiet and playful pieces such as 'Of Obscurity', 'Of My Self', and 'Of Solitude'. Modesty, humility, and a desire to have an intimate exchange with his reader can be seen in 'The Garden', where he takes readers into his home and his mind: 'I never had any other desire so strong, and so like to covetousness, as that one which I have had always, that I might be master at last of a small house and large garden . . . and there (with no design beyond my wall) whole and entire to lie' (Cowley 1668/2002).

With the exception of Cowley and a few others, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the term 'essay' applied to philosophical treatises, literary criticism, and religious sermons, and the personal essay was shoved off to a dark corner of the literary world. John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, Jonathan Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, and Lord Clarendon's (Edward Hyde) *Reflections upon several Christian Duties, Divine and Moral, by way of Essays* maintain a distant authorial 'I'. Clarendon, most prominently, rejected the personal voice of Montaigne. In essays such as *Of Contempt of Death*, *Of Friendship* and *Of Repentance*, Clarendon deals with Montaigne's themes, but his style is rigid, full of pregnant phrases and page-long sentences, presenting the authorial voice as a stern, serious thinker.

In sum, the personal or familiar essay of Montaigne made a subtle appearance in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in the work of Cowley and a few others, but it needed journalistic outlets and a journal-reading public before it could come into its own in the Romantic period and later, in our own time. The periodical essay of the late eighteenth century was a step towards this revolution and the real turning point was the arrival of two courageous journalists named Joseph Addison and Richard Steele.

THE ESSAY'S RISE TO POPULARITY

The early eighteenth century was a time of expansion in England – geographic expansion and economic expansion – and, as a consequence, there was a mass public ready for conversational and stylistically sparkling prose. The essay, though it started out personal and lyrical and then transformed to learned and lofty, had not been read by many people. All this changed in the eighteenth century. The rise of a non-aristocratic middle class who could read popularized the essay beyond what could have been predicted. This newly affluent group wanted to read, and what they wanted to read were magazines and newspapers (*not* entire books). Now statesmen, innkeepers, sailors, linen drapers, merchants, architects and card sharks alike could gather in coffee shops to discuss what they had read in daily newspapers and periodicals. To give just one indication of the magnitude of this readerly expansion: in 1700, Britain produced fewer than 25 periodicals publications; by 1780, at the beginning of the Romantic period, that number was 158 (Pratt 2001: 39–43). This meant that writers could now make a living from their work, and one of the surest ways was by writing periodical essays, with the caveat that being an essayist was not a glamorous career. These working

writers, because they were thought to 'grub' for a living, were lumped together under the derogatory term 'Grub Street'.

The best-known grubbers were Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Both Addison and Steele started out as politicians, holding office in the Whig government. Their political sensibilities went hand in hand with their writing (McDonald 1973: xiii). When the Tories came to power in 1710, Addison and Steele lost their political appointments and both men started the periodicals that would make them famous: Steele's *Tatler* and Addison's *Spectator*. They produced an astounding 900-plus essays in five years and gained celebrity status. Their pieces were witty, full of social gossip, and moral, literary, political, and social criticism. Writing for a generally unlettered audience, they covered every imaginable topic, from medicine, to aesthetics, theology, current events, science, literature, and economics (McDonald 1973: xiv).

More than any other eighteenth-century periodical, Addison's *Spectator* had a direct influence on what would become the Romantic essay. Addison brought the essay back into its own: he proved it was possible to write in a colloquial manner and treat commonplace subjects in an 'exquisite literary form and finish' (Winchester 1970: xi). The *Spectator* was such a hit because it was different from other papers, including the *Tatler*. Instead of containing short pieces of news, criticism, and politics, it celebrated and in fact crystallized the essay form by devoting an entire paper, and sometimes multiple issues, to a single topic or theme, exploring it in diverse, multiple ways. The conversational aspect of the essay was retained, although the depth of introspection, and the quiet, meditative quality of Montaigne and later Cowley, was replaced by playfulness and wit. Numerous periodicals sprung up in imitation of Addison and Steele, a testament to their popularity.

Addison's work put a new spin on the essay, for the *Spectator* was more than just the name of the paper. It was a fictional person, and the man behind the mask was Addison, just as the writer behind the *Tatler* was Steele. Mr Spectator, a tongue-tied conversationalist, liked to sit on the sidelines, taking in everything and participating in nothing, then writing up his observations every morning. He also had a small circle of social types as 'friends' who appeared with slapstick names in the pages of his magazine, such as Tory Foxhunter, Will Honeycomb, Sir Andrew Freeport. In fact, Steele and Addison's adoption of personas was another step, and a very important one, in the evolution of the personal essay. They created characters with overly clever names: Bickerstaff, Nestor Ironside, and my Lady Lizard, who protected them from the kind of revelation that would characterize Romantic essays. The adoption of such pseudonyms addresses the lengths authors would go in order to protect their true identity and life; because of that, the personal evoked in these essays feels manufactured in nature.

Eighteenth-century essayists twisted prose into so many different topics and invented so many different techniques that the forms make up 'some of the best moments in English literary history', according to Denise Gigante in her important anthology *The Great Age of the English Essay* (Gigante 2008: xv). Gigante also points out that, in terms of the development of the Romantic essay, we cannot underestimate the 'importance of the personality behind the speaking voice', of writers like Addison and Steele (xvii). But personality is not the same thing as the personal. Personality is shown in tone, diction, and the clear rhetorical choices that hook the reader; personal is much more vulnerable in nature. Whereas 'personality' can be thoroughly constructed, 'personal', at least in the way we are discussing it, cannot be constructed – or, if it can, is not as effective as that which closer to the bone, to use a phrase from Natalie Goldberg (1986).

Yet Addison and Steele did bring the essay to a tipping point by acknowledging that readers want to know that the persona and the author are one, and that the opinions and the events related are true. Personal revelations in these essays provided context, and that context established the ethos necessary to

transform the essay from just diary-style writing to useful conversation between author and reader.

BUILDING THE ROMANTIC ESSAY

Oddly enough, it is William Wordsworth – a poet – and his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a provocative if admittedly contradictory poetic call to arms, who gives us a language and a concept to talk about the personal essay's relationship with its reading audience that we cling to even today. In the Preface, Wordsworth laid out the problem he felt plagued poetry: a complete disregard for the common reader. He might not have been the first to explore genre manipulation, but he declared its necessity. He called for the formal experimentation that embodied the Romantic era, even though his contemporaries were quick to criticize the premise of the Preface, including writing partner Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Wordsworth might best be known for the 'formal engagement' adopted between author and reader via verse – an engagement that outlined the methods by which an author must align his or her writing in order to appease the reader. De Quincey, who would come to crystallize the Romantic essay and the personal essay, railed against this notion. If different methods were adhered to and utilized by greats such as Shakespeare and Milton, how dare Wordsworth call for a different structure? However, the acknowledgement of this relationship between author and reader is crucial to the development of the essay beyond the personal. Montaigne wrote a small note to his readers, saying 'you have here, Reader, a book whose faith can be trusted, a book which warns you from the start that I have set myself no other end but a private family one. I have not been concerned to serve you nor my reputation' (Montaigne 1987: lix). He went on to say that if he wrote for any public at all, it was for his 'friends and kinsmen' (lix).

As Montaigne said that he wrote for his 'friends and kinsman', so too did the Romantic writers. In groups, they were known to hold writing contests – contests from which several key pieces of literature emerged, including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Keats's sonnet 'To the Nile'. Outside of these groups, the circle still wrote for and to each other. The conversation continued as they parted: they continued by publishing these conversations for the public. In *London Magazine*, for example, the poets created a larger public audience for their private poetic concerns. De Quincey frequently published responses to other writers, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hazlitt, in *London Magazine* and *Edinburgh Magazine*. And many found places for their friends within the pages of the same magazines in which they published: Hazlitt introduced Lamb to *London Magazine* and it was here that Lamb would find his true voice as an essayist.

In other words, Romantic writers did write for their 'friends and kinsmen', but they also wrote for the reader – a public with whom they were not intimate and whom they did not know – and this transition, in terms of how and why an essay is created, is just what Wordsworth's Preface is about. But the Preface is more than just a component of the *Lyrical Ballads*. It is an essay in itself, evolving from informal conversation between writer and reader to theoretical discussion of the nature of language in the arts. Near the end of the Preface, Wordsworth, referring to poetry, argues that 'we not only wish to be pleased, but to be pleased in that particular way in which we have been accustomed to be pleased' (Wordsworth 1800/2007: 507). Even though Wordsworth never states this outright, the notion that readers need to be pleased in a particular manner is not specific to poetry. He does continually refer to the 'limits' of his Preface, which might indicate that he did in fact understand that his readers expected him to maintain a certain style and voice in the Preface from which he intended to divulge. Implicitly, Wordsworth is readying readers for the personal infusion to come with Lamb, De Quincey, Hazlitt, and other Romantic essayists.

Though there was a shift in the language, subject matter, and sense of readership for the essay, the publishing venues were periodicals, just as they had been during the bulk of the eighteenth century. The two great English reviews of the Romantic period, the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*, which were the major venues for essays, covered current affairs, politics, and philosophy, though the tone purposely avoided personal voice. They were the magazines that became the catalyst for personal essays to flourish. The *New Monthly Magazine* (1810), *Blackwoods* (1817), *London Magazine* (1821), and *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* had the same high standard of prose set out by the reviews, but they welcomed personal voice and experimentation. And ever since then it has been magazines – from specialty journals to literary magazines, glossies, and online publications – where the essay has found its best place for publication.

Of the Romantic essayists, perhaps the most successful was William Hazlitt. Hazlitt's essays have an aphoristic, poetic quality and are intimately personal; readers have the impression they are in the presence of a friend with whom they never tire of talking. Hazlitt's topics range widely: 'Disappointment'; the pleasures of hating; 'Reading Old Books'; the dexterity of Indian jugglers; and, perhaps his most important for the development of the essay, 'On Familiar Style'. He was fond of creating dramatic tension simply by pairing opposites. In 'On Vulgarity and Affectation', for example, he writes: 'Few subjects are more nearly allied than these two – vulgarity and affectation. It may be said of them truly that "thin partitions do their bounds divide" . . . Of the two classes of people, I hardly know which is to be regarded with most distaste, the vulgar aping the genteel, or the genteel constantly sneering at and endeavouring to distinguish themselves from the vulgar' (Hazlitt 1878: 215). He also perfected the literary profile, chronicling the great figures of the day, including Coleridge and Wordsworth. And Hazlitt's *My First Acquaintance with Poets* is considered one of the best short memoirs in English (Dirda 2009).

Perhaps what is most compelling about Hazlitt is that in his writings he openly admits his own weaknesses, so that the depth of insight he seems to have about human nature comes from a deep perception of himself. In 'On Depth and Superficiality' he admits, 'I am not, in the ordinary acceptation of the term, a good-natured man; that is, many things annoy me besides what interferes with my own ease and interest' (Hazlitt 2006). Yet Hazlitt's downfall was that he became *too* personal. While married but separated from his wife, he fell madly in love with an 18-year-old serving girl named Sarah Walker. He eventually published an overheated record of his infatuation as *Liber Amoris, or The New Pygmalion*, a book so overly confessional that it ruined his contemporary reputation. He exposed more than the public wanted to know about his wanton evenings with Sarah 'sitting in my lap, with her arms round my neck, and mine twined round her in the fondest manner' (Hazlitt 2000). All of which suggests that there must be some discretion in evoking the personal.

Charles Lamb, another Romantic writer recognized today for his contribution to the development of the personal essay, came to the form in a roundabout way. Like Wordsworth, with whom he was friends, he started out writing poetry but later turned, with his sister Mary, to prose and verse for children. It was only in his later years, and in part to make money, that he wrote essays. In the *Morning Post* of 1802, Lamb contributed an essay in the form of a letter and by 1811 he was writing for *Gentleman's Magazine*, *The Englishman's Magazine*, the *Quarterly Review*, the *Champion* and Leigh Hunt's *Reflector*. By 1813, Lamb seems to have found a niche in the essay form. Not only was he writing on topics of interest to the public but he had also established himself as a critic and writer of profiles. He wrote short pieces for the 'Table Talk' of Leigh Hunt's other paper, *The Examiner*, as well as critical essays and book reviews (he reviewed John Keats's poems, for example). But the

inauguration of the *London Magazine* in 1820 is what really sent his career soaring. It was here that Lamb adopted his pen name, Elia.

Like Addison and Steele, who had invented fictional personas like the *Tatler* and *Spectator* from which to write, Lamb constructed a persona, too. Elia, however, was less the exaggerated parody of the *Spectator*, and more a subtle, endearing voice. Elia, it turns out, was the real name of an old Italian clerk at the South Sea House where Lamb had worked in a tedious job he referred to as a prison. 'Elia himself added the function of an author to that of a scrivener like myself,' Lamb wrote (1911: 28). Thus, the fictional persona bears the traces of the humble clerk, who could read and write enough to perform secretarial duties, but who laboured long and unsung into old age. This persona – the sympathetic, humble writer – came to characterize Lamb's essays, and it is a sensibility that has transferred to present-day essayists as diverse as Barry Lopez and Cynthia Ozick.

The Elia essays show Lamb at his best: most imaginative, most intimate, and most playfully ironic. Champions of Lamb have called his essays 'delicate' in their style. They are full of puns, humour, and the sparkle of incongruent details and odd metaphors. A good example is his 'The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers', which begins with a list of striking metaphors: sweeps are imagined as 'young sparrows', 'matin larks', 'poor blots', 'clergy imps', 'small gentry', 'young Africans of our own grown', and tiny militia waving their brooms like brandished weapons over a conquered citadel. The same essay also demonstrates Lamb's sympathetic voice, one that would come to characterize the Romantic period in general (think of Wordsworth's low and rustic subjects). There is a passage in 'The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers' where Lamb takes joy in falling on his backside on a London street and being laughed at by a climbing boy. It is a moment of genuine charity of spirit.

Nonetheless, Lamb's essays are self-aware and parodic. Fred Randel, in his insightful book about Elia, points out how Lamb continually undercuts his own sincerity, how he 'means what he says and the opposite too' (1975: 14). Lamb himself admitted that Elia was 'too much affected by that dangerous figure – irony' (cited in Natarajan 2003). Yet most of all, his essays always favour spicy specificity over blurry abstractions. He writes not about the glory of Waterloo but about the silliness of the Prince Regent. He was not interested in London as a sociological fact but as a series of separate activities by individual people, and in this sense he anticipates today's essayists (Lamb 1911: 35).

Yet of all the Romantic essayists, Thomas De Quincey is the one who perhaps exemplifies the form today. If De Quincey were transplanted into the twenty-first century, he would find his home in the blogosphere, given the copious amount of writing he did during his tenure. He would have loved the vast, ever-growing audience (and he would have hated the inability to make much money from e-publication). De Quincey wrote prolifically, a result of his love of his subject and his need to earn a living. Still, despite the seemingly infinite number of essays he wrote, he is still best known for his first – *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. Published in two parts in *London Magazine* in 1821, *Confessions* was so wildly bald and provocative, both in its subject matter and its unprecedented access to its author, that it was printed in book form almost immediately. In his note to the reader, De Quincey acknowledges and apologizes for the indecency in writing what he knows he is about to confess. He writes that 'nothing, indeed, is more revolting to English feelings, than the spectacle of a human being obtruding on our notice his moral ulcers, or scars, and tearing away that "decent drapery"' (1886: xxiii) – but that tearing away the 'decent drapery' is just De Quincey's purpose. His apology is stated in vain; he does not mean to apologize but instead wishes his reader to be reminded of what social order and etiquette demand of conversation between gentlemen prior to his deconstruction of the conversation.

De Quincey's writing spans the period from the publication of *Confessions* in 1821 to his

death in 1859. During this time, he wrote so much as to fill over 20 volumes. As a younger man, he found himself drawn to Wordsworth and his *Lyrical Ballads*. De Quincey sought to provide the kind of praise he felt Wordsworth deserved; his goals were never (with any real formality) to follow in Wordsworth's footsteps, although at times he is said to have harboured some poetic aspirations. Prior to his death, De Quincey began assembling his own work for these volumes. Originally titled *Selections Grave and Gay*, De Quincey sought nearly every printed work he had produced, including writings he had completed for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Given the literary focus of many of De Quincey's writings, it might be easy to presume that his are not so focused on the reader as other Romantic essayists of the time. However, De Quincey's survival hinged on his ability to write what the reading public desired. Without the continued support of *London Magazine* and *Edinburgh Magazine*, he could not support his lifestyle, including the opium habit he nursed. Through this, it is clear that not only did the public find De Quincey's material interesting – they sought it out repeatedly. John E. Jordan, in his *De Quincey as Critic* collection, discusses just how valuable De Quincey's criticism was to become. Of the author's criticism of John Donne, Jordan writes, 'De Quincey's enthusiasm for Donne anticipated the twentieth-century admiration for that poet' (1973: 42). The possible validity of such a claim aside, it illustrates precisely why criticism is vital as an essay topic. To write only about the 'I' would do a disservice to the reader, insinuating that all the reader cares to discover in any given essay is a mirror into his or her own subconscious desires. But with critical essays, the author acknowledges the reader on an intellectual level. The reader participates in the scholarly conversation previously meant for literary circles alone. Still, it is *Confessions* for which we must thank De Quincey. Without the essay, we might still be operating with that same 'decent drapery' between author and reader.

The Romantic essayists are not limited to Hazlitt, Lamb, and De Quincey. Writers such as Leigh Hunt, in pieces titled 'On the Graces and Anxieties of Pig-Driving' and 'On Washerwomen', and Fanny Burney, in 'Suggested Husbands for Fanny Burney', also took their readers into a private space by exposing their personal lives and opinions. In this way, they saw themselves more in the tradition of Montaigne than of Steele and Addison. Hazlitt said of Montaigne that he was 'the father of this kind of personal authorship among the moderns, in which the reader is admitted behind the curtain, and sits down with the writer in his gown and slippers' (Hazlitt 1819/2007). There is permanence in this kind of relationship that subsequently ensues between writer and reader, beyond the end of the essay. The personal essay would develop from the Romantics to a place where the reader was invited into the author's mind in pieces like Lamb's 'Imperfect Sympathies', 'Dream Children: A Reverie', 'The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers', 'Modern Gallantry', and 'Old China', along with Hazlitt's 'On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth' and De Quincey's *Confessions*, not to mention the myriad writers who adopted the essay form in their writing careers. With such an invitation, the reader is given access to what was once considered an important wall between artist and audience. Any mystery the writer might depend on to elevate his position in regard to the reader crumbles, leaving behind moments and vignettes in which the reader not only engages but also relates. From this, the essay exists outside itself. It becomes a tangible example of the building relationship between author and reader. Alexander J. Butrym (1989) argues that it is 'the essay's ability to draw us by indirection out of ourselves [that] makes it a popular genre', and what the essay draws us into is the author.

SEE ALSO: Autobiography and Confession; Burney, Frances; Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, Prose; De Quincey, Thomas; Hazlitt, William; Hunt, Leigh, Prose; Lamb, Charles; Wordsworth, William, Prose.

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